

CONSENSUS, DEMOCRACY, & CONGREGATIONAL POLITY!

(Annual Congregational Meeting)

As we prepare for our annual meeting of the congregation, I would like to talk to you this morning about consensus, democracy, and the meaning of congregational polity, which is our way of governance. To begin that conversation I want to quote at some length from a work by Conrad Wright, preeminent historian of Unitarianism and Professor of American Church History Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School (HDS), who died in February 2011, at the age of 94. Wright was a member, regular attendee, occasional preacher, and clerk at the (Unitarian Universalist) First Parish in Cambridge, the congregation in which he had grown up. He is also the author of many of the best books and articles on various facets of Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist history.

The following material is excerpted from the introduction and first section of:
Congregational Polity A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice by Conrad Wright, Published by Skinner House Books Boston, Copyright © 1997 by the Unitarian Universalist Association

Congregational polity is so much taken for granted by Unitarian Universalists that they tend to overlook its importance, particularly its importance as one of the key elements in the consensus that holds the denomination together. When Unitarian Universalists identify the set of values they hold in common, they resort to high-level abstractions like freedom, reason, and tolerance. Yet the meaning of freedom and tolerance is revealed more clearly by the way people behave than by the generalizations they utter. So it is a fact of no small consequence that Unitarian Universalists stand in a tradition of congregational polity that is almost four centuries old; that they are much more conservative with respect to the practice of that polity than they are with respect to doctrine; that they have been congregationalist in polity much longer than they have been liberal in theology; that, indeed, their congregationalism has proved to be more durable and adaptable to changing times than any of the doctrinal formulations— whether of God, or human nature, or human destiny—that dominate accounts of the history of liberal religion.

Our polity is important because it defines the way in which we believe human beings should be related to one another for ecclesiastical purposes, and it may be a guide or model for human relationships of other kinds. There are real differences between democratic, hierarchical, oligarchical, and authoritarian patterns of social organization. Behind these social forms lie understandings of the nature of human beings. When conceptualized and phrased in theological language, this means both a doctrine of human nature, and a doctrine of the Church. So polity is not a matter of casual social arrangements, but goes very directly to the heart of basic issues of theology.

(Preacher's note: for brevity and simplicity, I have not attempted to change or explain Christian theological references in historical quotations cited by Conrad Wright in the following sections even though many may be uncomfortable for a number of modern UUs. I ask that you make your own adjustments. bk)

“A DUE FORME OF GOVERNMENT” Governor John Winthrop preached a lay sermon aboard the Arbella in 1630, in which he declared the purpose of the great migration to New England to be “to seeke out a place of Cohabitation and Consorteshippe vnder a due forme of Government both ciuill and ecclesiasticall.”¹ So far as church polity was concerned, the due form of government was to be congregationalism; there is no difficulty in tracing a continuous tradition from Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s to the present-day Unitarian Universalist denomination. We may take as a starting point, therefore, the polity of the New England Puritans, and in particular the normative statement of it set forth in the Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline (1648).² The Platform begins with the assertion that church government is not a matter of simple human improvisation, but rather of God’s command as revealed in Scripture: “The partes of Church-Government are all of them exactly described in the word of God . . . & therefore to continue one & the same vnto the apearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”³ Church polity is based on the New Testament, where there is no mention of popes, or archbishops, or bishops as officers with jurisdiction over other clergy, or presbyteries with authority over particular churches.

Each particular church is a “gathered” church—that is to say, it is made up of a select body of those who may be presumed to be of the elect....A number of the elect in a particular locality are not yet a church until they establish a continuing relationship with one another. It is the covenant that creates that relationship: “Saints by Calling, must have a Visible-Political-Union amongst themselves, or else they are not yet a particular church. . . . This Form is the Visible Covenant, Agreement, or consent wherby they give up themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society, which is usually called the Church-Covenant.”⁵ The original covenants were ordinarily quite brief statements of a willingness to walk together in Christian fellowship, and were not creedal in character....The church, then, is a community of the Saints, distinct from the world, united for worship and for “the mutuall edification of one another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Iesus.”⁷

Such a covenanted body of the Saints is a complete church, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, with no need for any hierarchy to mediate his authority to it. Indeed, it is the members who constitute the church; and officers, such as ministers, ruling elders, and deacons, are not essential to its being, however much they may be necessary to its wellbeing....Still, the Lord Jesus “out of his tender compassion hath appointed, and ordained officers which he would not have done, if they had not been usefull & need full for the church.”⁸ ...According to the Puritan scheme of logical classification,⁹ the officers exercising authority in the church are termed elders, of which there are two kinds: the ordained ministers and the lay ruling elders.

I apologize for the amount of material quoted, but I hope that this is helpful in understanding the importance of our form of church governance. I have preached previously about the time and energy it takes to act in democratic fashion, and the messiness of pure democracy, so I hope that this description of congregational polity by Conrad Wright has helped to emphasize what is at stake when we come together for our annual or special congregational meetings. I have often heard UUs commenting about the poor attendance at civil elections and bemoaning the ease with which a small group may manipulate decisions by choosing to place them in years or times without a

Presidential or Statewide election. In our polity, the same cautions about involvement apply. We get better and more representative decisions when as many members as possible come to discuss and vote upon important issues. In most congregations the decision to call a minister gets the best turnout, but decisions about buying and selling property, building new congregational facilities, and spending money on renovations, repairs or anything outside the annual budget often get members interested!

Smaller congregations and a few larger ones have tried to make decisions by consensus, but that can be even harder than pure democracy. Consensus requires taking the time to get everyone to come to the same place about a decision. It can be a wonderful trust building exercise, but it takes lots of time and commitment of all involved. Consensus requires compromises that do not come easy for many Unitarian Universalists, not that consensus decisions are without some disagreements, but they require getting to a place where everyone is satisfied or at least equally dissatisfied with the outcome. It is almost impossible to use consensus in a group larger than 20-30, and harder as group size increases.

I wish that Congress would remember the key notion of compromise, but I would never expect such a group to attempt consensus decision-making. Here at First UU we are small enough that we could try it, but I expect we would soon revert to a more basic democratic practice.

One of the other challenges within UU congregations is that in our hope that everyone will agree on something, we often spend way more time listening to minority arguments than to testing the strength of the majority on an issue. This actually is a great source of frustration for many, because so much time is spent before a decision that people start walking out. If we start out remembering that we act in accord with a democratic congregational polity, we may be able to listen briefly and respectfully to the less prevalent opinions without getting frustrated. At General Assembly, there is a practice of balancing pro and con arguments and moving to cut off debate when either side has run out of speakers.

If we were a Christian denomination, or all agreed on another source of divine inspiration, we could appeal to a higher power, but since we have many beliefs we do well to practice democracy. As I recall from United Methodist meetings, which can be quite democratic, prayer was always in order, though prayers can help to calm disputes or sometimes to become harangues for one position or the other! I have also heard so-called rational arguments be presented quite passionately by some UUs over the years!

When it comes right down to it, I guess the most important thing to remember as we gather for our annual meeting, is to respect each other. Respect is behind and within our UU Principles and it is a key to building a solid liberal religious community. Though we may disagree on many matters, the way that we listen and speak to each other, and all people, with respect makes all the difference. Though we may agree with each other far more often than most religious groups, we also have a tendency to become quite agitated if others cannot see the logic that inspires our opinions! And of course I am speaking for myself as much as for anyone else!

So now, as we prepare to celebrate and participate in this annual meeting which is so important in our Congregational Polity, I remind us to show the respect to each other which recognizes our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person. I challenge us to engage democratically, while seeking justice with compassion. I invite us to practice what we have each learned in the progression of our own spiritual, philosophical, and life journeys. And I encourage us to act in ways that evidence our hope and commitment for building a better world starting with our own lives and with this liberal religious community of which we are members! Further, I remind us of the interdependent interconnected web of all being of which we are parts, which also means that whatever actions we take, whatever decisions we make, the ripples will continue to impact our community, each other, and the world in which we live, long beyond this meeting.

May we be led to good decisions by the energy of our community, our leaders, our Principles, and by the beliefs which we have learned from modern and ancient religious, spiritual, and philosophical leaders and exemplars!

So may it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!